DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 338 080 FL 019 805

AUTHOR Syamala, V.
TITLE Acquisition of English Syntax by Non-Native Speakers. A Case Study of ESL Learning by Malayalee Children.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Regional Language Centre Seminar (Singapore, April 22-28, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Interference (Language); Learning Strategies; *Malayalam; *Second Language Learning; Structural Grammar; *Syntax; Tenses (Grammar); Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Interrogatives; Negative Stipulation

ABSTRACT

The process of acquisition of three syntactic structures in Engish (i.e., yes-no questions, wh-questions, and negation) was studied. The subjects were 30 school children whose native language as well as medium of instruction was Malayalam, one of the four dominant Dravidian languages. The children were in the second, fourth, and sixth year of their formal instruction in English. It is hypothesized that: (1) second language learning is a creative construction process like first-language acquisition, and that the two processes are identical; and (2) the developing transitional grammars of the learners gradually approximate the grammar of the target second language. The first hypothesis was validated, but the second was not. Among the findings are the following: (1) the chief learning strategies were simplification and over-generalization; (2) derivationally less complex structures are comparatively easier to acquire than more complex ones; (3) the English tense system seems to be a real hurdle for second language learners; and (4) the percentage of correct responses is consistently higher and that of unattempted items lower in the written tests than in the oral. Contains 14 references. (LB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Acquisition of English Syntax by non-native Speakers - A case study of ESL learning by Malayalee Children

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Syamala, V.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dr. V. Syamala,
Prof. of English,
All Saints College,
Trivandrum.

The problem

The problem studied here is the process of acquisition of three syntactic structures in English, Viz., Yes-No questions, Wh-Questions, and Negation. The informants are school children whose mother-tongue as well as medium of instruction is Malayalam, one of the four dominant Dravidian languages. It is hypothesised that (1) L2 learning also is a creative construction process like L1 acquisition, and hence the two processes are identical and that (2) the developing transitional grammars of the learners gradually approximate the grammar of the Target Language, Viz., English.

Procedure

The informants were thirty students, ten each from Standards V, VII, and IX representing the second, fourth, and sixth year of their formal instruction in English and the first, second and third stages of their linguistic development respectively. Their exposure to English inside and outside the classroom, methods and materials of teaching English, etc. were studied. Data involving use of the selected structures was collected through written and some specially devised oral tests. The data was analysed into correct, unattempted, and erroneous responses and their proportion through the three developmental stages traced. The erroneous responses alone were further analysed for emergent deviant patterns and their sources traced. These were compared with

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED 358080

sample data from L1 and some other L2 studies of acquisition, with the help of tentative rules formulated to represent the different error types. Table 1 gives a consolidated picture of the proportion of responses indicative of the pattern of development.

Findings

As Table I shows, at stage I the % of correct responses is very small. At stage II there is a rise, but stage III indicates hardly any progress. This is so for all the three structures. However, none of them can be said to be acquired even at stage III. The stagnation at stage III may be due to what Selinker (1972.215) calls fossilization. In L2 learning, especially in formal setting, the learner's language instead of steadily developing into the adult model of the Target Language, as it does in the case of L1 acquisition, seems to be arrested at certain stages beyond which there is no progress.

The learners do not overcome certain linguistic hurdles and consequently certain erroneous structures persist in their linguistic system permanently. Fossilization, as Selinker observes, represents a freezing of the Inter Language at a plateau beyond which the learner cannot progress; the fossilized structures tend to reappear in the Inter Language even when seemingly eradicated. This may be the reason for the arrest of progress at stage III in the present study. Another study conducted by me shows that most of the error types persist even at college level (Syamala V. 1985). The learner's Inter Language seems to have no redemption from the fossilized state.

The error types compared with data from L1 and other L2 studies of acquisition brought out striking similarities in

the sequence of developmental stages, the learning strategies employed, and the types of errors made. For instance, in the case of Yes-No questions, rising intonation is the earliest strategy employed by the L1 and L2 learners considered. In the present study this is followed by subject-auxiliary inversion. In P. Menyuk (1969.74) and Klima and Bellugi (1966) also auxiliary inversion is the next stage of development. Native children also do not produce at the early stage the full set of sequences of the adult auxiliary system. Simplification and overgeneralisation are common strategies employed by both native and non-native children. Most of the error types in the present data are available in L1 data and L2 data from other studies also.

Eg: (a) Redundant auxiliary

L1 data -Menyuk P. (1969-73)	1) Is this is the powder?
L2 data -Syamala V.(1983.148)	2) Is he doesn't write stories?
	3) Can he is very clever?

(b) Want of subject-Verb concord.

L1 Data-Klima and Bellugi (1966.204)	4) Does lions walk?
L2 Data-Syamala,V (1983.148)	5) Does they play games in the evening?

(c) Both auxiliary and MV as carriers of tense marker.

L1 data - Klima and Bellugi (1966.204)	6) Oh, did I caught it?
	7) Did I saw that in my book?
L2 Data-Syamala,V (1983.148)	8) Did they went to Madras Yesterday?

Menyuk P. (1969.58) has reported three categories of deviations viz.,

1. errors due to omission, Eg:
   L2 data-Syamala,V (1983.218)

2. Substitution, Eg:
   L2 data - Syamala,V (1983.218)

and

3. redundancy,Eg:
   L2 data-Syamala,V (1983.218)

9) I go New York
10) Who is best friend?
11) When you come here?
12) She's a nice daddy
13) Where did he live?
    (for where do you live)
14) She took it the hat
15) When do you the children play?

Instances of these are available in the L2 data from other studies such as Mukattash, L. (1980), Duskova (1969), Richards (1974), Ravem, R. (1974). In the case of negation also there are striking similarities. The earliest strategy employed for expressing negation is conjoining the negative element either initially or finally (mostly 'no;/'not' followed by one or two content words). In the L1 study of Menyuk, P. (1969.74) the first developmental step in the generation of negative sentences is reported as

Conjunction of Neg+s (Neg may appear alone, as S may be imperative). Many of the error types isolated in the present study are available in the data from L1 and other L2 studies also. For instance,

a) Negative morpheme not connected to an auxiliary verb.

Eg: <u>L1 Acquisition</u>

Klima et al (1966.194)

16) He no bite you
17) I no want envelope

Menyuk, P. (1969.73)

18) I not touch
19) I no do this

<u>L2 Acquisition</u>

Milon (1974.142)

20) I not cheat
21) You touch not the base

Syamala, V. (1983.318)

22) Raju not climb tree
23) Rani not get up

(b) Copula omission

Eg. Ll Acqusition

Klima et al (1966.196) 24) This not ice cream

Menyuk (1969.73) 25) That not cowboy

Menyuk (1970.106) 26) That not book

L2 Acquisition

Wode (1980.111) 27) You not dummy

Wode (1980.143) 28) Yours no good car

Syamala, V. (1983.318) 29) Sita not eating

30) Today not a rainy day

(c) Tense indicated both by the auxiliary and the MV

Eg: Ll Acquisition

Klima et al (1966.196) 31) I didn't did it

32) You didn't caught me

L2 Acquisition

Richards, J.C. (1974.182) 33) He did not found...

Syamala,V. (1983.300) 34) I did not went to school yesterday

(d) Errors due to auxiliary omission/substitution/redundancy.

Eg: Ll Acquisition

Menyuk, P. (1971.106) 35) I not falling down

L2 Acquisition

Milon (1974.140) 36) I'am not climb

Wode (1980.113) 37) I'am not finish

Syamala, V (1983.318) 38) She doesn't singing

39) Sita is not done homework.

40) He not studies well

(e) Indeterminate 'some' not replaced by 'any'

Eg: Ll Acquisition

Klima et al (1966.196) 41) You don't want some supper

42) I didn't see something

L2 Acqusition

Wode (1980.158) 43) No, nobody wants to give you something

Syamala, V.(1983.318) 44) There is no something in the round table

In the case of Wh-interrogatives also such similarities are noticeable. Most of the error types in the present study are available in L1 data and L2 data from other studies also.

Eg: (a) Absence of subject- Auxiliary inversion

L1 Acquisition

Menyuk, P. (1969. 75-76) 45) What you are writing?
46) Why they are here?

L2 Acquisition

Ravem, R (1974. 141-142) 47) What she is doing?
48) Why you can't buy like that shoes?

Wode, H (1978.49) 49) Why we are so slow?

Syamala, V (1983.218) 50) What he will bring?
51) When he will come?

(b) Absence of 'do-support'

L1 Acquisition

Klima & Bellugi (1966.205) 52) Why Paul caught it?

L2 Acquisition

Ravem, R (1974.145) 53) What he wants?

Wode, H (1978.49) 54) What you want it?

Mukattash, L(1981.320) 55) Why the boys ran home

Syamala, V (1983.218) 56) Why he came late?

(c) Aux./be Omission

L1: Menyuk, P (1969.69.71) 57) Where pencil?

L2: Ravem, R (1974.141,3) 58) Why you smiling?

Syamala,V (1982.218) 59) When you come here?

(d) Concord

L1: Klima & Bellugi (1966.205)	60) Why he don't know how to pretend?
L2: Ravem, R (1974.142)	61) What you did after Rani go to bed?
Syamala, V (1983.218)	62) When does children play?

Table II, III & IV give the different types of errors emergent at the three developmental stages in the study. Most of these have been reported in L1 and other L2 acquisition studies. This is significant in the light of the extremely different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the present group and the others and also their difference in age and congnitive development.

It was also noticed that the proportion of similarities is greater between L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition in natural setting, ie. within the cultural environment of the Target Language than between the former and L2 acqusition in formal classroom setting as in the present study.

Again, there are greater similarities between data from studies of L2 acquisition in formal classroom setting by learners with different MT bckgrounds (Mukattash 1980 & 81; Taylor & Krishna Rao 1981) than between them and L1 acqusition data. This indicates that the differences (which are not as considerable as the similarities) between data from L1 and L2 acqusition in natural setting on the one hand, and that from L2 learners in formal setting on the other, are chiefly due to difference in their age, cognitive development, exposure to language, learning situations, etc, and the inherent difficulty of certain structures in English, rather than interference from MT.

The first hypothesis was validated by the data, while the second was not. The systematicity of errors (the types of which were absent in the input data), the very low incidence of errors attributabe to MT interference, (Yes/No Questions only 5% of the total errors; Wh-Questions only 11%), and the striking similarities to L1 acqusition in the sequence of developmental steps, learning strategies, and error types, validate the hypothesis that L2 learning is also a creative construction process like L1 acqusition. The two processes are similar in many respects though not identical.

The second hypothesis, however, was invalidated since the transitional grammatical systems instead of steadily progressing towards the adult model, as in the case of L1 acquisiton, seem to be caught in a quagmire of fossilized erroneous structures.

The study also brought out the following features in the acquisiton of the three structures:

1) The chief learning strategies employed by the learners are simplification and over generalization. Reliance on MT as a strategy is least pronounced. The strategy of producing only perceptually and semantically salient items was also borne out by the data Eg: external placement of the negative and interrogative markers, as in

63) No he studies well
64) No touch
65) What he will bring?

2) Derivationally less complex structures are comparatively easier to acquire than the more complex ones. This is indicated by the consistently higher incidence of correct + M (odal) sentences (not requiring 'do' - support transformation) than of - M sentences.

3) The % of correct responses is consistently higher and that of unattempted items lower in the written tests than in the oral. This is probably because in the written they have the given sentences to manipulate whereas in the oral they have to produce sentences on their own in certain stimulus situations.

4) The English tense system, especially its auxiliary system seems to be a real hurdle to L2 learners. A large portion of errors are due to confusion between auxiliaries which results in

(a) auxiliary substitution, as in — 66) Sita did not eating

(b) auxiliary redundancy,as in — 67) Who was showed the way?

(c) auxiliary omission as in — 68) Which dress I wear?

In my study on Yes/No Questions (Syamala, V. 1983) 45.03% of errors were due to confusion between auxiliaries. The abstract nature of the auxiliaries, their slight and at times even empty semantic content and their fine subtle grammatical functions probably render them hard to acquire. The appropriate use of 'do' as auxiliary is especially difficult. One thing, there is no equivalent of 'do' in Malayalam and another, its function as a tense carrier is purely grammatical and not semantic.

5) The present study indicates only limited interference from MT. But my teaching experience and another study conducted by me (Syamala, V. 1987) show that the proportion of errors due to MT interference is very high at the phonological, lexical, idiomatic and stylistic levels.

Pedagogical implications

Though linguistic theories may not have direct application to language teaching, they often do have pedagogical implications of value. Studies of the present type vindicate that sole reliance on contrastive analysis for L2 teaching may be fruitfully supplemented, if not replaced, by an error-based approach. Concentration on the actual errors made will help better to identify areas of difficulty, explore the probable sources of difficulty, and devise remedial measures. Since dearth of opportunities for its use is an impeding factor, the present purely structural approach may be synthesised with a functional one. The hypothesis that L2 learning also is a creative construction process implies that it will be acquired naturally. But this is true only of L2 learning in natural environment. Where L2 learning is in formal classroom situation opportunities should be created for the use of the language in meaningful situations. The importance of teaching methods and materials in formal instruction is obvious. Proper training programmes, especially for teachers at the beginning stages of English teaching should equip the teachers to apply effective techniques with flexibility to suit particular learner communities. Text books should be prepared with interesting lessons meant to improve the basic language skills. At college level also adequate emphasis should be given to language teaching. Otherwise we will be trying to build up the superstructure of literature on feeble and undermined linguistic foundations.

Well-trained teachers, interesting lessons and explanation of rules where necessary, supplemented with ample exposure to language through interaction, reading,etc,will help to reorganize the classroom so as to facilitate acquisiton.

References:

Duskova, L. On sources of errors in foreign language learning. (In IRAL 7, 1969, 11-36.)

Klima,E.S., and Bellugi, U. Syntactic regularities in the speech of children. In Psycholinguistic papers, ed, Lyons, J. and Wales, R.J. Edinburgh University press, 1966.183-219.

Menyuk, P. Sentences Children Use, Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press 1969.

Milon, J.P. The development of Negation in English by a second language learner., In TESOL Quarterly 8/2. 1974. 137-143.

Mukattash Lewis. Yes/No questions and the contrastive Analysis Hypothesis,In ELT Journal 34/2,1980.133-145

Mukattash Lewis. Wh-Qyestions in English: A problem for Arab Students, Notes and discussion In IRAL 19/4, 1981 317-332.

Ravem, R. The Development of Wh-Questions in First & Second language Learners. In Error Analysis, ed. Richard, J.C. 1974. 134-155.

Richards, J.C. Social Factors, Interlanguage, and Language Learning. In Error Analysis, ed. Richards, J.C. Longman 1974. 64-91.

Selinker, L. Interlanguage. In IRAL 10/3, 1972. 209-231.

Syamala, V. Acquisition of English by Malayalee Children. Unpublished Ph. D dissertation, University of Kerala, 1983.

-------- Yes/No Questions by Malayalee ESL learners. In IJDL, XIV/2, June 1985. 274-285.

-------- Mother tongue interference and ESL learners. In IJDL XVI/2 June, 1987, 315-320.

Taylor, H.W.and Krishna Rao, A.V. Indian English 'Errors' and American English Usage.In IRAL 19/2, 1981.137-147.

Wode, H. Language Development: leanring a second language Tubingen Narr, 1980.

TABLE I : Proportion of responses from the three structures through the three developmental stages.

Structure	Total No.of responses	Stage I			Stage II			Stage III		
		Corr.	UA.	Erro.	Corr.	UA.	Erro.	Corr.	UA.	Erro.
Wh-Questions	300	33 (11%)	108 (30%)	159 (53%)	83 (27.7%)	28 (9.3%)	189 (63%)	83 (27.7%)	27 (9%)	190 (63.3%)
Yes-No Questions	200	15 (7.5)	98 (49%)	87 (43.5%)	53 (26.5%)	10 (5%)	137 (68.5%)	68 (34%)	20 (10%)	112 (56%)
Negation	440	27 (6.14%)	72 (16.36%)	341 (77.5%)	160 (36.36%)	23 (5.23%)	257 (58.4%)	162 (36.82%)	30 (6.82%)	248 (56.36%)

TABLE II - Types of errors at the three developmental stages

Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
1. a) He is clever?	1. a) Are they go to the beach?	1. a) Are they play games in the evening?
b) He cannot sing?	b) Are they play games in the evening.	b) Are they study well?
2. a) Play they games in evening?	2. a) Can you like milk?	2. a) They study well?
b) Study they well?	b) Can he write stories?	b) You read poetry?
3. a) Cannot he sing?	3. a) Can he clever?	3. a) Can they play games in the evening?
b) Did not they go to the beach?	b) Can you sing a song now?	b) Can they went to Madras?
4. Went to Madras yesterday?	4. a) They did go to the beach?	4. a) Does they play games in the evening?
	b) You read poetry?	b) Did you read poetry?
5. Don't I like silk?	5. a) Did go to Madras yesterday?	5. a) Can they playing?
	b) Will sing now?	b) Can you sing a song now?
6. a) Is you read poetry?	6. a) Can you sing?	6. a) Did he is very clever?
b) Is you sing?	b) Are you very clever?	b) Did we shall go to the ice-cream Parlour
7. a) Read poetry?	7. a) Is he doesn't write stories?	7. a) Did you sing a song now?
b) Your poetry reading?	b) Can he is very clever?	b) Do you sing at the next meeting?
	8. Are they play?	8. a) Play they games in the evening?
		b) Study they well?
	9. a) Play they games in the evening?	9. a) Are you sing?
	b) Study they well?	b) Would you sing at the meeting yesterday
	10. Did they went to Madras yesterday?	
	11. Is he sing? Have you went to the meeting yesterday?	

TABLE III : Types of errors at the three developmental stages

Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
Ia. 1. What he will bring?	Ia. 1. When he will come?	Ia. 1. Which dress you will wear?
2. When he will come?	2. What he will bring?	2. What he will bring?
b. 1. Why he came home late?	b. 1. Why he came late?	b. 1. How he came?
2. Where he went to yesterday?	2. How you come here?	2. Which book he like best?
II. 1. Why late home?	IIa. 1. What is he bring?	c. 1. You had how many pencils?
2. What will bring?	2. Which dress is you wear?	2. Your school which English text follow?
	3. Where are you live?	II. 1. Why does he come home late?
	b. 1. Why did he crying?	2. Where did you live?
	2. When did he come?	IIIa. 1. Where are you live?
	3. What did he buy?	2. What is he bring?
	III. 1. How does he come?	b. 1. Why does he crying?
	2. Where did you live?	c. 1. Where will you live?
	IV. 1. Where did go to yesterday?	IV. 1. Why did come home late?
	2. When will come?	2. Which book likes best?
	Va. Who is best friend?	V. 1. When he came?
	b. When do you the children play?	2. Which dress I wear?
	c. Where did he live?	VI. 1. Where did he went yesterday?
	VI. 1. How many pencils?	2. How did he came?
	2. Whose book?	VII. 1. Where he live?
	VII. 1. When you come here?	2. Which dress I will wear?
	2. Which English text you following?	VIII. 1. Whose this book?
	VIII. 1. Why did he came home?	2. How many pencils?
	2. How did he came?	IX. 1. Who was showed the way?
	IX. 1. Who did show the way to school?	X. 1. When does children play?

TABLE IV : Error patterns at the three different stages.

Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
Major Patterns	**Major patterns**	**Major patterns**
I. a. 1. No he studies well	I a. 1. She doesn't singing.	I. 1. Walk not fast.
2. No will you go out?	2. They did not come.	2. He not studies well.
b. 3. No cup	b. 3. Did not sing loudly.	II. 3. I don't went to school yesterday.
4. No touch	4. Did not walk fast.	4. He don't studies well.
c. 5. Don't loudly	c. 5. Won't you want a pencil?	III. 5. The toy is hiddent anywhere.
6. No studies well	6. Don't you going to the beach?	6. Every one is crying.
d. 7. No, I will go out.	d. 7. Sita is not done homework.	IV. 7. Everything is not right.
8. No, I want a pencil	8. Sita is not get up at 6 O'clock.	8. Anybody did not answer.
II 9. He don't studies well	II. 9. Raju not climb tree.	V. 9. There is dust nowhere.
10. Will no you go out?	10. Rani not get up.	10. The toy is hidden nowhere.
11. Walk don't fast	III. 11. Somebody can do this	VI. 11. He did not late.
III 12. He is no sometimes late.	12. Anything is here	12. Sita did not eating.
13. He no always sings well.	IV. 13. He don't studies well.	VII. 13. Not every one has a flower
IV 14. Someone not reading.	14. I don't went to school yesterday.	**Minor patterns**
15. Everyone not flower.	V. 15. No go home.	I. 14. Sita notimes gets 100% marks
V 16. No, it is not.	16. No touch.	15. He is notimes late.
17. No, he is not.	VI. 17. There is dust nowhere.	II. 16. Not go home.
VI 18. Will not you go out?	18. The toy is hidden nowhere.	17. Not touch.
19. Did not you want a pencil?	**Minor patterns**	III. 18. You did not want a pencil?
Minor patterns	I. 19. Everything not correct.	19. You did not go to school?
I 20. She is no singing.	20. Anyone not answer.	IV. 20. Sita not cating.
21. She is don't singing.	II. 21. There is no one in the round table	21. To-day not a rainy day.
II 22. Bring it not here. Bring it don't here.	22. No one is right	V. 22. In Sita's paper no one right.
III 23. He is not studies well.	III. 23. He is notimes late.	23. No one in the round table.
IV 24. Sita's homework not.	24. Sita notimes got 100% marks	VI. 24. To-day was not a rainy day.
	IV. 25. There is no something in the round table.	VII. 25. To-day no rain.
	V. 26. No she talking in class.	VIII. 26. Won't bring it here
	27. No I don't walk fast.	IX. 27. She is done't singing.
	VI. 28. You didn't want a pancil?	X. 28. Did not you want a pencil?
	29. You didn't want umbrella?	XI. 29. No, I don't sing loudly.
	VII. 30. No one answer.	XII. 30. Gon't to the playground.
	VIII. 31. To-day was not a rainy day	XIII. 31. No one has not flower.
		XIV. 32. The pen did not anywhere in the room.